

WC 8803013

Teton-Sioux Man's Shirt, circa 1860s.

This shirt was made of two deer hides, cut across just below the front legs, and sinew-sewn together along this cut to form the shoulderline, leaving a slit for the neck. The front is somewhat shorter than the back. The hind legs were left as pendants at the bottom corners of this poncho-like garment. The remaining front parts of the two hides were sewn on sideways to form the sleeves. There are sinew-sewn seams along the lower parts of the sleeves, leaving the upper arms and the sides of the body open. Sewn on to the front and back of the neck opening is a triangular flap or bib. Body, flaps and sleeves are self-fringed, those on the sleeves extremely long.

Excepting the neckflaps, the upper three-quarters of the shirt is painted a dark blue color, probably with imported laundry bluing. The remainder of the shirt was painted a pale yellow ochre color.

Bands of porcupine quillwork cross the shoulders and run down the sleeves. Their application on separate strips of hide allowed their transfer from a worn-out shirt to a new one. The quillwork consists of seven lanes, executed in two-thread single quill sewing. The bands are bordered with a narrow lane of lazy-stitched blue seed beads. Lazy-stitched beadwork decorates the two neckflaps.

On the back of the shirt, long tassels of human hair form a fringe along the quillworked strips. Each tassel is wrapped in white quills at the head.

Dimensions: length 37 inches, 94 cm.

Acquired from Alexander Gallery, New York, without documented history or origin.

During the 19th century, this was the classic type of Indian shirt worn on the central Plains. With minimal tailoring, the pattern was largely determined by the natural shape of the hides. The decorative details of this shirt identify it as originating from the Teton-Sioux. Long and wide strips of quillwork, placed in slanted position on front and back, became fashionable in the 1860s, and also the use of seed beads indicates that period. Long pendants at the bottom of the shirt, once a conventional expression of respect for the game spirits, disappeared in the 1870s.

Prior to the 1850s, shirts of this type were the exclusive regalia of the Wicasa Yatapika, the four highest ranking Teton chiefs. These men were expected to exemplify the virtues of compassion, generosity, courage and wisdom. In those days the tassels of human hair referred to brave deeds in battle, but as whole, the hair fringe also represented all the people for whom the shirt owner was responsible. Although referred to as 'scalp locks' these tassels were given by friends and relatives. The blue and yellow painting were said to symbolize Sky and Rock, two of the major supernatural powers in the Sioux cosmos. However, this coloring had a dual meaning. With dark blue and black used

interchangeably, the dark upper half of the shirt duplicated the black body paint of warriors returning from a successful raid.

After the 1850s, these shirts lost much of their political significance. “War shirts”, their decoration still having prestigious connotations, identified their owners as war veterans and respected people.

The quillwork decoration on this shirt tells us something more of its owner. The bear paws pictured on the yellow background almost certainly indicates that this man had been blessed in his dreams by a bear spirit. Reckless courage in warfare and the power to cure the wounds of warfare were the usual blessings of this spirit. The yellow quillwork refers to the yellow face paint used by bear dreamers. In battle, their weapons were “bear knives” and “bear spears”; as doctors, they were herbal specialists. However, there was Faust-like quality to “bear power”, it was believed to bring bad luck in the end.

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Peterborough, Ontario
April 2006

Literature:

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Lessard, F.D., *A Wicases Shirt in the Derby Collection*; in D. Wooley, edit., *Eye of the Angel*, Northampton, Mass., 1990.